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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

# Public perception of the countryside

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## 2 Perception of the countryside: the views of the Countryside Commission

Sir Derek Barber

### INTRODUCTION

Why do we need to concern ourselves with finding out what users of the countryside think?

- Don't the professionals, those with strong connections with the countryside, know anyway by their very training, experience or instinct?
- In addition, if we really need to know, cannot we happily depend on the letters in our in-trays or the conversations with friends and associates?

In today's world, no organisation can afford to be that complacent. Knowing what people think – whether they be customers or those we are charged with representing or serving – is a vital and first step in providing what people want and appreciate. Whether we call it market research, opinion polling, or just conducting surveys, virtually everyone with an interest in people needs to know what they think of their organisation or service.

### EXPLORING PERCEPTION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

In the Countryside Commission we use a variety of research techniques to help us understand people and their views about the countryside. We recently completed a recreation policy review aided by several specific research projects investigating attitudes, motivations and values for the

countryside. For us the purpose of understanding perceptions is that it can be drawn into the policy-making process.

But what is wrong with finding out perceptions by simply listening to what people tell us especially through pressure and user groups – don't they reflect the main tides of popular opinion?

The very nature of countryside recreation explains why not. Enjoying the countryside is an informal pastime, it takes place often at short notice and requires little or no training, fitness or specialist equipment. The very nature of the countryside reinforces this – there are no turnstiles, no overt management presence – and it doesn't close on Bank Holidays.

So, despite the fact that enjoying the countryside is a major leisure pursuit embracing 4 out of 5 members of the population each year, it is largely unorganised, unrepresented and without a voice.

The special role of the Commission is to protect the public's interest in the countryside and we couldn't claim to be doing that without a clear understanding of what people feel.

Most research techniques that are used to identify perceptions require people to react instantly to a series of questions put by strangers either on the doorstep or the telephone. This must surely have its limitations in measuring what people really feel as there isn't the time to contemplate, the atmosphere to reveal, or necessarily the right questions to elicit the response. An opinion about a straightforward concept is all one can expect to obtain – with the strong risk that what really matters remains hidden.

Getting at how people form their views and how they are influenced requires a much more subtle approach which is found in a method called 'Qualitative Research'.

This technique uses informal discussions amongst groups of people selected and invited in advance. Such groups can be one-off or meet regularly over a period of time. The key feature of these groups is that there is time for people to think and express their true feelings.

The Commission has recently used qualitative research in an exploration of people's attitudes towards open space. As it was able to shed light on how people's views were formed, it may be of particular interest to this conference which is as much concerned with the influences behind the development of views, as of the actual views themselves.

What came across in the research was the certainty that most people do feel strong attachments to the countryside even though the majority visit it only infrequently.

These attachments were expressed in 3 ways.

First, the countryside offers relaxation, contentment and the chance to get away from the anonymous and often hostile pressures associated with urban life. Most people liked being alone in the countryside but only when

'alone' meant being in the company of family and friends. A visit to the countryside is therefore often an extension of people's social life – a place they like to enjoy in the company of others, a pleasure to share.

Second, the countryside gives access to a pleasurable range of sounds, smells, sights and other experiences of nature. The countryside is welcomed as being in marked contrast to the artificial quality of most people's ordinary urban experience. Many people spoke fondly of the variety and interest contained in the natural environment, the pleasures of the changing seasons, the opportunities for chance encounters. The urban environment, by comparison, was often seen as predictable. The intrinsic properties of the countryside are therefore a source of great delight and enjoyment for visitors.

Third, the countryside offers experience of another way of life, through contact with villages, pubs, hotels, shops and craftsmen. It may well be that rural communities in the traditional sense are largely a thing of the past, but nonetheless life in the countryside was valued because it appeared to have changed more slowly than life in towns - and because it still retained many positive qualities that are no longer to be found in most people's daily lives. Country people have a greater contact with, and appreciation of, nature, and are expected to be more friendly and neighbourly; family and community life in the countryside is thought of as somehow more durable and supportive. These ideals are often reinforced by advertising and TV programmes and were accepted as authentic by those who visit the countryside occasionally or rarely.

In brief, the research showed that the value of visiting the countryside comes from a combination of the intrinsic qualities that can readily be experienced in the countryside, and the contrast which these offer with the circumstances of people's everyday lives. The countryside offers an escape from the realities and unpleasant aspects of urban life. The research has captured an amazing richness of feelings and emotions, showing just how much the countryside matters to people from all walks of life, not just to the frequent visitors.

#### **FORMATIVE INFLUENCES ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION**

How are these attachments formed? The crucial influence comes from childhood experiences within different environments. The critical phase is that of middle childhood, between 6 and about 10 or 11 when children actively encounter the external world on their own for the first time. Attachments to nature, the thrill of exploration, the power to exercise control over small portions of the world, the freshness and vividness of that first experience lay the ground for adult attachments. People carry traces of their

experience in memories of childhood places, childhood experiences and these memories and feelings are profoundly reinforced by nostalgia. Early contact with nature and the physical environment is thus a strong influence.

From this evidence it can be argued – obviously and as a confirmation of what we ‘knew’ – that education and schooling can play a strong role in attracting children to use and appreciate nature and the countryside but also in repelling them.

Whether that appreciation develops into a deeper involvement and desire to understand the natural world and or engage in countryside recreational pursuits seems to depend on personality, family support/interest and secondary education.

In later life, attachments to particular places are developed through special holidays or trips which are remembered with particular fondness, usually through experiences with companions, husband or wife, family members or close friends.

Adult attachments very clearly reflect current cultural values and particular landscape tastes. The powerful anti-urban sentiment identified in positive values for the countryside has a long and rich tradition within English cultural values and is daily reinforced through advertising and the media. These play a significant but largely unacknowledged role in people’s attachments to the countryside.

This combination of individual experience and cultural values goes some way to explain the tremendous fund of goodwill towards the countryside identified by the research, and leads us to assert quite firmly that the countryside matters deeply to people.

A separate strand of countryside research concerned with people’s motivations behind visiting the countryside and carried out about the same time, showed an interesting contrast of the image and memories of the countryside compared with the experience of trying to use it today. In probing the positive reasons for visiting the countryside, the research using a similar group discussion technique, unveiled a number of negative aspects that spoil people’s visits, aspects that threw some doubt on this earlier comforting image.

The countryside was often not as accessible as first appeared. What had seemed like attractive countryside when driving through on previous occasions, on returning turned out to be just farmed fields and unsuitable for walking: ‘nowhere to stop and nowhere to walk’ were frequent comments. The countryside was failing to live up to expectations, the image of an attractive and accessible place was not always borne out in practice.

The research also revealed that many people lack confidence when they think about a trip to the countryside. Common features in the countryside such as gates, fences, crops, wire and animals often deter potential visitors.

Few people will cross a gate unless there is a positive invitation to do so, and footpaths which suffer from neglect discourage further use. Most people worried about unwittingly trespassing, getting lost, not knowing where to go – in brief, they were unsure of their rights. Only frequent countryside users and local rural residents in their own patch did not express these anxieties.

Finally, there was felt to be little information available to explain where to go in the countryside and what to do there. This perceived dearth of information reinforced feelings of uncertainty about the countryside.

## CONCLUSION

A central conclusion which can be drawn from these results is that the providers of recreation facilities should try to understand the needs and perceptions of people, rather than simply be technically expert at providing facilities. Opportunities to enjoy the countryside are of little value unless people are aware of them, value them and are able to enjoy them.

These results have also been influential in forming the recreation policies the Commission has recently announced. We have declared our objective of improving and extending opportunities for people to enjoy the countryside. We know the countryside matters to people and we know that much work remains to be done to ensure their enjoyment. We also recognise that as public awareness about, and concern for, the conservation of the natural environment increases, the conservation of the countryside must, and will, ride in tandem with our recreational strategy.